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Students protest at Columbia University on October 7, 2024. (Victor J. Blue for The Washington Post / Getty)

IDEAS

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY'S ANTI-SEMITISM PROBLEM

If the bullying of Jewish students had happened to any other group, the institution would be appalled.

By Franklin Foer

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IN JANUARY, WHEN the historian Avi Shilon returned to Columbia University from winter break, a thought coursed through his mind: *If calm can take hold in Gaza, then perhaps it could also happen in Morningside Heights*. Just a few days earlier, in time for the start of the semester, Hamas and Israel had brokered a cease-fire in their war.

Over the many months of that war, Columbia was the site of some of America's most vitriolic protests against Israel's actions, and even its existence. For two weeks last spring, an encampment erected by anti-Israel demonstrators swallowed the fields in the center of the compact Manhattan campus. Nobody could enter Butler Library without hearing slogans such as "Globalize the intifada!" and "We don't want no Zionists here!" and "Burn Tel Aviv to the ground!" At the end of April, students, joined by sympathizers from outside the university gates, stormed Hamilton Hall—which houses the undergraduate-college deans' offices—and then battled police when they sought to clear the building. Because of the threat of spiraling chaos, the university canceled its main commencement ceremony in May.

Shilon felt that the tamping of hostilities in Gaza made the moment ripe for the course he was scheduled to teach, "History of Modern Israel," which would examine the competing Jewish and Palestinian narratives about his native country's founding.

But Columbia soon disabused him of his hopes. About 30 minutes into the first session of his seminar, four people, their faces shrouded in keffiyehs, burst into his classroom. A protester circled the seminar table, flinging flyers in front of Shilon's students. One flyer bore an image of a boot stomping on a Star of David; another stated, THE ENEMY WILL NOT SEE TOMORROW.

In the Israeli universities where Shilon had studied and taught, he was accustomed to strident critiques of the country. Sometimes he even found himself sympathizing with them. Taking up difficult arguments struck him as

the way to navigate tense disagreements, so he rose from his chair and gingerly approached the protesters. "You're invited to learn," he told them.

But the protesters ignored him. As one held up a camera to film, another stared at it and delivered a monologue in which she described Shilon's class—which had barely progressed beyond a discussion of expectations for the semester—as an example of "Columbia University's normalization of genocide."

After she finished her speech, the demonstrators left the room, but a sense of intrusion lingered. Columbia University Apartheid Divest, the umbrella group that organized protests on campus, posted a video of the action, with the caption: "We disrupted a zionist class, and you should too." The university later offered to provide security for Shilon's class because it couldn't be sure if CUAD was bluffing.

OVER THE PAST two years, Columbia's institutional life has become more and more absurd. Confronted with a war on the other side of the world, the course of which the university has zero capacity to affect, a broad swath of the community acted as if the school's trustees and administrators could determine the fate of innocent families in Gaza. To force the university into acceding to demands—ending study abroad in Israel, severing a partnership with Tel Aviv University, divesting from companies with holdings in Israel—protesters attempted to shut down campus activity. For the sake of entirely symbolic victories, they were willing to risk their academic careers and even arrest.

Because the protesters treated the war as a local issue, they trained their anger on Jewish and Israeli students and faculty, including Shilon, some of whom have been accused of complicity with genocide on the basis of their religious affiliation or national origin. More than any other American university, Columbia experienced a breakdown in the fabric of its community that demanded a firm response from administrators—but these administrators tended to choke on their own fears.

Many of the protesters followed university rules governing demonstrations and free expression. Many others did not. Liberal administrators couldn't or wouldn't curb the illiberalism in their midst. By failing to discipline protesters who transgressed university rules, they signaled that disrupting classrooms carried no price. By tolerating professors who bullied students who disagreed

with them, they signaled that incivility and even harassment were acceptable forms of discourse.

It was as if Columbia was reliving the bedlam of 1968, which included a student takeover of the university and scarred the institution for decades. And just like in the Vietnam era, the university became a ripe target for demagogues on the right, who are eager to demolish the prestige of elite higher education. And now that Donald Trump and his allies control the federal government, they have used anti-Semitism as a pretext for damaging an institution that they abhor. In the name of rescuing the Jews of Columbia, the Trump administration cut off $400 million in federal contracts and grants to the university. Trump officials then sent a letter demanding—as preconditions for restoring the funds—a series of immediate, far-reaching steps, including suspending and expelling Hamilton Hall protesters, producing a plan to overhaul admissions, and putting the school's Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies under "academic receivership."

Mark Rudd, president of Students for a Democratic Society, addresses students at Columbia University in May 1968. (Hulton Archive / Getty)

And in an attempt to suppress political views it dislikes, the administration authorized the unlawful detention of Mahmoud Khalil, an alumnus who helped organize campus protests, and sent federal agents to search two dorm rooms. Another graduate student, targeted by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, fled to Canada rather than risk apprehension. The Trump administration's war on Columbia stands to wreck research, further inflame tensions on campus, and destroy careers—including, in a supreme irony, those of many Jewish academics, scientists, physicians, and graduate students whom the administration ostensibly wants to protect.

Trump's autocratic presence unbalances every debate. But just because his administration is exploiting the issue of anti-Semitism does not mean that anti-Jewish activism is not an issue at Columbia. Somewhere along the way, one of the nation's greatest universities lost its capacity to conduct intellectual arguments over contentious issues without resorting to hyperbole and accusations of moral deficiency.

On Israel, the issue that most sharply divides Columbia, such accusations took a sinister cast. Jewish students faced ostracism and bullying that, if experienced by any other group of students on campus, would be universally regarded as unacceptable. It was a crisis that became painfully evident in the course of the war over Gaza, but it didn't begin with the war, and it won't end with it.

THE STORY OF American Jewry can be told, in part, by the history of Columbia's admissions policy. At the turn of the 20th century, when entry required merely passing an exam, the sons of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe began rushing into the institution. By 1920, Columbia was likely 40 percent Jewish. This posed a marketing problem for the school, as the children of New York's old Knickerbocker elite began searching out corners of the Ivy League with fewer Brooklyn accents.

To restore Anglo-Saxon Protestant demographic dominance, university president Nicholas Murray Butler invented the modern college-application process, in which concepts such as geographic diversity and a well-rounded student body became pretexts to weed out studious Jews from New York City. In 1921, Columbia became the first private college to impose a quota limiting the number of Jews. (In the '30s, Columbia rejected Richard Feynman, who later won a Nobel Prize in physics, and Isaac Asimov, the great science fiction writer.) Columbia, however, was intent on making money off the Jews it turned away, so to educate them, it created Seth Low Junior College in Brooklyn, a second-rate version of the Manhattan institution.

Only after World War II, when America fought a war against Nazism, did this exclusionary system wither away. When I attended Columbia for four blissful years, a generation or so ago, the school was a Jewish wonderland, where I first encountered the pluralism of American Jewish life. I became friends with red-diaper babies, kids raised in Jewish socialist families. I dated an Orthodox woman who had converted from evangelical Christianity. Several floors of my dorm had been nicknamed Anatevka, after the shtetl in *Fiddler on the Roof*; they had kosher kitchens, and on the Sabbath, the elevators would

automatically stop on each of those floors. I studied Yiddish with a doyenne of the dying Yiddish theater and attended lectures with Yosef Yerushalmi, one of the great Jewish historians of his generation. At Columbia, for the first time in my life, I felt completely at home in my identity.

I also imbibed the university's protest culture: I briefly helped take over Hamilton Hall in the name of preserving the Audubon Ballroom, the Upper Manhattan site of Malcolm X's assassination. Columbia wanted to convert the building into a research center. The leader of our movement, Benjamin Jealous, who went on to head the NAACP, was suspended for his role; I was put on probation.

Nostalgia, however, is a distorting filter. Long before the October 7 attack by Hamas on southern Israel that sparked the subsequent invasion of Gaza, there were accusations of anti-Semitism on campus. I tended to wish them away, but after the Hamas attack, the evidence kept walloping me.

Although protests against Israel erupted on many campuses after October 7, the collision between Zionists and anti-Zionists was especially virulent at Columbia. Less than a week after the attack, a woman was arrested in front of the library for allegedly beating an Israeli student who was hanging posters of hostages held in Gaza. (The Manhattan district attorney found that the woman hadn't intentionally hit the student and dismissed the case after she apologized and agreed to counseling.)

Soon after the war in Gaza began, the *Columbia Daily Spectator* interviewed more than 50 Jewish students about their experiences: 13 told the student newspaper that they had been attacked or harassed; 12 admitted that they had obscured markers of their Jewish identity, tucking away Star of David necklaces and hiding kippahs under caps to avoid provoking the ire of fellow students.

To Columbia's misfortune, the university had a new president, Minouche Shafik, who'd arrived by way of the London School of Economics. Any leader would have been overwhelmed by the explosion of passions, but she seemed especially shell-shocked by the rancor—and how it attracted media, activists, and politicians, all exploiting the controversy for their own purposes. Panicked leaders, without any clear sense of their own direction, have a rote response: They appoint a task force. And in November 2023, Shafik appointed some of Columbia's most eminent academics to assess the school's anti-Semitism problem. (Shafik had hoped to have a parallel task force on

Islamophobia, but Rashid Khalidi, a Columbia historian and the most prominent Palestinian scholar in the country, called the idea a "fig leaf to pretend that they are 'balanced,'" and the idea never hatched.)

In "listening sessions" with students, task-force members heard one recurring complaint: that administrators were strangely indifferent to Jewish students complaining about abuse. Rather than investigating incidents, some administrators steered Jewish students to mental-health counseling, as if they needed therapy to toughen them up. Students who had filed official reports of bias with the university claimed that they'd never heard back. (To protect the privacy of listening-session participants, the task force never confirmed specific instances, but it deemed the complaints credible.)

Perhaps, early on, one could imagine benign explanations for the weak response. But in June, as the task force went about its investigation, *The Washington Free Beacon* reported on a series of text messages fired off by four Columbia deans as they attended a panel on Jewish life at Columbia. (A panel attendee who had sat behind one of the administrators had surreptitiously photographed the text thread over her shoulder.) Instead of sympathetically listening to panelists discuss anti-Semitism, the deans unwittingly confirmed the depth of the problem. These officials, whose role gave them responsibility for student safety, snarkily circulated accusations about the pernicious influence of Jewish power. "Amazing what $$$ can do," one of the deans wrote. Another accused the head of campus Hillel of playing up complaints for the sake of fundraising. "Comes from such a place of privilege," one of them moaned. After the *Free Beacon* published the screenshots, Columbia suspended three of the administrators. Not long after, they resigned.

A month later, at the beginning of the academic year, the task force published a damning depiction of quotidian student life. An especially powerful section of the report described the influence of Columbia University Apartheid Divest, the organizer of the anti-Israel protests. CUAD was a coalition of 116 tuition-supported, faculty-advised student groups, including the university mariachi band and the Barnard Garden Club.

CUAD doesn't simply oppose war and occupation; it endorses violence as the pathway to its definition of liberation. A year ago, a Columbia student activist told an audience watching him on Instagram, "Be grateful that I'm not just going out and murdering Zionists." At first, CUAD dissociated itself from the student. But then the group reconsidered and apologized for its momentary lapse of stridency. "Violence is the only path forward," CUAD said in an

official statement. That wasn't a surprising admission; its public statements regularly celebrate martyrdom.

When groups endorsed CUAD, they forced Jewish students to confront a painful choice. To participate in beloved activities, they needed to look past the club's official membership in an organization that endorsed the killing of Jews and the destruction of the world's only Jewish-majority country.

According to the task force, complaining about the alliance with CUAD or professing sympathy for Israel could lead to a student being purged from an extracurricular activity. When a member of the dance team questioned the wisdom of supporting CUAD, she was removed from the organization's group chats and effectively kicked off the team. A co-president of Sewa, a Sikh student group, says that she was removed from her post because of her alleged Zionism. In an invitation to a film screening, the founder of an LGBTQ group, the LezLions, wrote, "Zionists aren't invited."

I'm not suggesting that Jews at Columbia feel constantly under siege. When I gave a speech at the campus Hillel group last spring, many members, even some who are passionate supporters of Israel, told me that they are happy at Columbia and have never personally experienced anything resembling anti-Semitism. The pro-Palestinian encampments included Jewish protesters, some of whom received abuse from their fellow Jews. To the task force's credit, its report acknowledges many such complexities, but it brimmed with accounts of disturbing incidents worthy of a meaningful official response. Unfortunately, that's not the Columbia way.

HAD I BEEN wiser as an undergrad, I could have squinted and seen the roots of the current crisis. In the 1990s, Israel was a nonissue on campus: The Oslo peace process was in high gear, and a two-state solution and coexistence were dreams within reach. But the most imposing academic celebrity on campus was the Jerusalem-born Edward Said, a brilliant professor of literature, who had served as a member of the Palestine Liberation Organization's legislative arm.

During my years at Columbia, Said, who was battling cancer, was a remote figure. A dandy who loved his tweeds and was immersed in the European cosmopolitanism that he critiqued, he taught only a course on Giuseppe Verdi and imperialism.

Still, he bestrode the university. His masterwork, *Orientalism*, was one of the few books by an active Columbia professor regularly included in the college's core curriculum. That book, by the university's most acclaimed professor, was also a gauntlet thrown in the community's face. Said had convincingly illustrated how racism infected the production of knowledge in Middle Eastern studies. Even if scholarship paraded as the disinterested study of foreign cultures, it was inherently political, too often infected by a colonialist mindset.

To correct for that bias, admirers of Said's book concluded, universities needed to hire a different style of academic, including scholars with roots in the region they studied, not just a bunch of white guys fascinated by Arabs. The Middle Eastern–studies department filled up with Said protégés, who lacked his charm but taught with ferocious passion. Because they were unabashed activists, these new scholars had no compunction about, say, canceling class so that students could attend pro-Palestinian rallies.

Joseph Massad, a Jordanian-born political scientist who wrote a history of nationalism in his native country, became the most notorious of the new coterie soon after arriving in 1999. His incendiary comments provoked his ideological foes to respond with fury and, sometimes, to unfairly twist his quotes in the course of their diatribes. But his actual record was clear enough. Writing in the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram* in 2003, he accused the Israelis of being the true anti-Semites, because they destroyed the culture of the Jewish diaspora; the Palestinians were the real Jews, he argued, because they were being massacred.

Violence, when directed at Jews, never seemed to bother him. This moral vacuity was on full display in the column he wrote in response to October 7, which he called a "resistance offensive," for *The Electronic Intifada*, a Chicago-based publication aligned with the more radical wing of the Palestinian cause. His essay used a series of euphoric adjectives—"astonishing," "astounding," "awesome"—to describe Hamas's invasion, without ever condemning, let alone mentioning, the gruesome human toll of the massacre, which included rape and the kidnapping of babies. In fact, he coldly described the towns destroyed by Hamas as "settler-colonies."

Massad has long been accused of carrying that polemical style into the classroom. In the course description for a class called "Palestinian and Israeli Politics and Societies," he wrote in 2002: "The purpose of the course is not to provide a 'balanced' coverage of the views of both sides." On the one hand,

that's an admirable admission. On the other hand, Jewish students complained that he treated those with dissenting opinions as if they were moral reprobates, unworthy of civility.

In 2004, a pro-Israel group in Boston put together a low-budget documentary called *Columbia Unbecoming*, which strung together student testimony about the pedagogical style of Columbia's Middle Eastern–studies program. To take two representative incidents: After an Israeli student asked Massad a question at an extracurricular event, the professor demanded to know how many Palestinians he had killed; a woman recounted how another professor, George Saliba, had told her not to opine on Israel-Palestine questions because her green eyes showed that she couldn't be a "Semite."

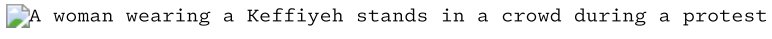
In response, Massad denied ever meeting the Israeli student; Saliba wrote that he didn't recall the green-eyes comments and that the student might have misconstrued what he was saying. But Columbia's then-president, Lee Bollinger, instantly recognized the problem and appointed his own task force to examine the complaints. But it would have taken more than a task force to address the underlying problem. The emerging style of the American academy, especially prevalent at Columbia, viewed activism flowing from moral absolutes as integral to the mission of the professoriat. But a style that prevailed in African American–studies and gender-studies departments was incendiary when applied to Israel. With race and gender, there was largely a consensus on campus, but Israel divided the university community. And as much as Bollinger professed to value dissenting opinions, his university was ill-equipped to accommodate two conflicting points of view. And the gap between those two points of view kept growing, as Said's legacy began to seep into even the far reaches of Columbia.

IF I WERE writing a satiric campus novel about Columbia, I would have abandoned the project on January 29. That's the day the *Spectator* published lab notes for an introductory astronomy course, written by a teaching assistant, that instructed students: "As we watch genocide unfold in Gaza, it is also important to tell the story of Palestinians outside of being the subjects of a military occupation. Take 15 minutes or so to read through the articles 'Wonder and the Life of Palestinian Astronomy' and 'In Gaza, Scanning the Sky for Stars, Not Drones.' Remind yourself that our dreams, our wonders, our aspirations … are not any more worthy." At Columbia, a student couldn't contemplate the Big Dipper without being forced to consider the fate of Khan Yunis.

This was a minor scandal, but a representative one. Over the years, the subject of Israel became nearly inescapable at Columbia, even in disciplines seemingly far removed from Gaza. For a swath of graduate students and professors, Palestinian liberation—and a corollary belief that Israel is uniquely evil among nations—became something close to civic religion.

In 2023, at the School of Public Health, a professor who taught a section of its core curriculum to more than 400 students denounced Jewish donors to the university as "wealthy white capitalists" who laundered "blood money" through the school. He hosted a panel on the "settler-colonial determinants of health" that described "Israel-Palestine" as a primary example of a place where the "right to health" can never be realized. Several years ago, the Graduate School of Architecture, Preservation and Planning offered a class on "Architecture and Settler Colonialism" and hosted an event titled "Architecture Against Apartheid."

By insisting that Israel is the great moral catastrophe of our age, professors and graduate students transmitted their passions to their classes. So it is not surprising that Jewish students with sympathy for Israel found themselves subject to social opprobrium not just from their teachers, but also from their peers. In its September report, the task force that Shafik had convened described the problem starkly: "We heard about students being avoided and avoiding others" and about "isolation and even intimidation in classrooms, bullying, threats, stereotypes, ethnic slurs, disqualification from opportunities, fear of retaliation and community erosion." This was the assessment of Columbia professors, many of them unabashed liberals, who risked alienating colleagues by describing the situation bluntly.



Pro-Palestinian protesters march around Columbia in April 2024. (Michael M. Santiago / Getty)

IN SEPTEMBER, THE task force presented its findings to Columbia's University Senate, an elected deliberative body that brings faculty, administrators, and students into the governance of the institution. Its creation was a utopian response to the 1968 protests. But the senate session about anti-Semitism was a fiasco. Almost from the start, members began to attack the task-force report's motives and methodology—even its focus on discrimination against Jews. "No such resources were put into covering anybody else's subjective experience on this campus," the English professor Joseph Slaughter said, "and I think that creates real problems for the community." The hostility to the report wasn't meaningless fulmination; it was evidence of how a large part of the faculty was determined to prevent the university from acknowledging the presence of anti-Jewish activity in the school.

No other university has a governance structure quite like Columbia's, and for good reason. Most academics with busy lives want to avoid endless meetings with their colleagues, so most professors aren't rushing to join the senate. In recent years, the senate has attracted those of an activist bent, who are willing to put up with tedium in service of a higher cause. Two members of the rules committee were allegedly part of a faculty contingent that stood guard around the encampments on the quad. They did so even though they had jurisdiction over potentially disciplining those protesters. As it happens, exceedingly few of the protesters who flagrantly disregarded university rules have suffered any consequences for their actions. Columbia didn't impose discipline on students who stormed Hamilton Hall last spring—at least not until last week, amid Trump's threat of drastic cuts to the university. But by then, a culture of impunity was firmly rooted.

BARNARD COLLEGE IS integrated into Columbia, but it has its own set of rules, its own governance structure and disciplinary procedures. And it acted swiftly to expel two of the students who were in the group that burst into Avi Shilon's class in January. (Columbia had suspended another participant, pending an investigation, and failed to identify the other.) For once, it felt as if the university was upholding its basic covenant with its students: to protect the sanctity of the classroom.

But instead of changing anyone's incentives, Barnard's hard-line punishment inspired protesters to rush Millbank Hall, banging drums and chanting, "There is only one solution, intifada revolution." In the course of storming the building, they allegedly assaulted a Barnard employee, sending him to the hospital. For more than six hours, they shut down the building, which houses

the offices of the administration, and left only after the college threatened to bring in the police and offered an official meeting with the protesters. But the possibility of police action wasn't a sufficient deterrent, because a week later, two dozen protesters returned to occupy Barnard's library.

In some deep sense, the university had lost the capacity to reassert control, let alone confront the root causes of the chaos. And looking back over the past few months, I see a pattern of events that, in some ways, is far more troubling than the encampments that received so many headlines. In November, protesters descended on the building that houses Hillel, the center of Jewish life on campus—its main purpose is to provide Jewish students with religious services and kosher food—and demanded that the university sever ties with the organization. The next month, a demonstrator marching up Broadway punched a kippah-wearing Jew in the face. In January, to memorialize the murder of a Palestinian girl, protesters filled the toilets of the School of International and Public Affairs with cement. Skewering two Jewish women affiliated with the school—its dean, Keren Yarhi-Milo, and an adjunct assistant professor at the school, Rebecca Weiner—they spray-painted the message "Keren eat Weiner," with an image of feces.

All of this unfolded as the Trump administration launched an assault on higher education. But thus far, Columbia students haven't bothered to protest that. Unlike Palestine, which for most students is a distant cause, the stripping of federal funding for the institution will ripple through the lives of students and faculty. But university activism has its sights obsessively locked on Israel.

That Trump assault on Columbia has now arrived, in the heaviest-handed form. Anti-Semitism on campus, a problem that merits a serious response, has been abused in the course of Trump's quest to remake America in his image. Tellingly, the administration's withholding of federal grants will fall hardest on the hard sciences, which are the part of the university most immune to anti-Semitism, and hardly touch the humanities, where overwrought criticisms of Israel flourish.

The indiscriminate, punitive nature of Trump's meddling may unbalance Columbia even further. A dangerous new narrative has emerged there and on other campuses: that the new federal threats result from "fabricated charges of antisemitism," as CUAD recently put it, casting victims of harassment as the cunning villains of the story. In this atmosphere, Columbia seems unlikely to reckon with the deeper causes of anti-Jewish abuse on its campus. But in its past—especially in its history of overcoming its discriminatory treatment of

Jews—the institution has revealed itself capable of overcoming its biases, conscious and otherwise, against an excluded group. It has shown that it can stare hard at itself, channel its highest values, and find its way to a better course.

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